

## **UTAS Catalyst Program – Embedding First Year Support in Faculties**

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### **Introduction**

In 2004 two members of the University of Tasmania (UTAS) Student Services team presented a Nuts and Bolts session at the First Year in Higher Education Pacific Rim Conference in New Zealand. This session focussed on innovations in information provision to students and staff including a First Year Website and Email List, Fact Sheets, and Frequently Asked Questions. These strategies supported and built on core Student Services activities of Counselling, Disability Support, the Careers and Employment Service, and the First Year Experience Project.

In the intervening two years, UTAS has recognised the importance of embedding first year support within areas of study rather than being provided from a central location (Round, 2004). This approach has been successfully trialled through the “Student Experience Catalyst” Program. Towards the end of 2004 teaching development funds were made available for faculties to co-fund initiatives focussed on enhancing the student experience within the faculty. Proposals from three faculties were funded.

The proposed workshop will describe the aims and key components of the three faculty-based Catalyst programs, and the outcomes of evaluations conducted to date. Discussion will focus on the challenges and advantages involved in embedding centrally funded positions within faculties, and supporting and engaging first year students within their area of study.

### **The Student Experience Catalyst Programs**

The overall aims of all three Catalyst Programs mirrored the UTAS aims with regard to improving and enhancing the first year experience. These are:

- To support the transition of new students to the University, particularly those in their first year of study.
- To support University staff in their work with first year students.
- To improve student retention.

All programs involved the appointment of a Catalyst Officer located within the faculty. The Catalyst Officers each reported to a reference group comprising representatives from faculty, Student Services, and the Centre for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching (CALT).

Within the broad aims listed above, the three programs implemented vastly different strategies in their attempts to address the transition and retention issues particular to their faculty. While the workshop will describe each program in some detail, the following is a summary of the key components implemented and evaluated during the Catalyst initiative.

- A “one-stop-shop” for first year students, providing information, assistance and referral.
- Liaison with staff to support and assist their work with students.
- Drip-feeding information at key times throughout the semester through bulk emails and slides presented in lectures.
- A week-long orientation program, including literacy, numeracy and ICT diagnostic testing as key components. Students not reaching the required skill level were required to attend remediation classes for six weeks during Semester One.
- Identification of “at risk” students through a variety of means, with follow-up including referral to workshops, personal and course/careers counselling, linking with a mentor, and general assistance with decision making.
- A comprehensive program focussing on course and career path, graduate destinations, and the development of a student portfolio to record evidence against generic graduate attributes.
- Mentor programs and social programs to assist with networking and making connections with other students and staff.

Whilst a number of these strategies are not new, the way in which they have been implemented as an integrated program through centrally funded project officers embedded in the faculties is innovative.

Evaluation of the three initial Catalyst Programs clearly demonstrated the value of embedding first year support in faculties. The Catalyst Officers were able to establish close working relationships with staff and students and were able to identify and address the particular issues and priorities of each faculty, as demonstrated by the different strategies employed to achieve the same aims. Since the initial funding period, two of the Catalyst Programs have been extended for 2006 with the appointment of full-time Catalyst Officers in each faculty. Negotiations are underway with the third faculty and other faculties at UTAS, seeking to implement co-funded Catalyst Programs within these areas in the future.

## **Reference:**

Round (2004) Survey of literature on student retention. Student Services: University of Northumbria, UK.